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ABSTRACT

Public criticism of the quality of teaching in the schools has put pressure on teacher education programs to improve curriculum. The problem of quality instruction, however, may rest to a large extent with administrators who assign teachers inappropriately in the schools and with state education agencies that sanction the practice. One estimate is that more than 200,000 teachers in the United States are assigned to teach subjects and grade levels outside their areas of certification. This digest discusses why administrators misassign staff, the extent of misassignment, where misassignment occurs, results of misassignment, and who is responsible for misassignment. (Eight references are included.) (JD)

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CLEARINGHOUSE ON TEACHER EDUCATION

ERIC DIGEST 14

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Misassignment of Teachers in the Public Schools

Public criticism of the quality of teaching in the schools has put pressure on teacher education programs to improve curriculum. But the problem of quality instruction may rest to a large extent with administrators who assign teachers inappropriately in the schools and with state education agencies that sanction the practice (Council for Basic Education 1985). One estimate is that more than 200,000 teachers in the United States are assigned to teach subjects and grade levels outside their areas of certification (Roth 1986). This digest discusses why administrators misassign staff, the extent of misassignment, where misassignment occurs, results of misassignment, and who is responsible for misassignment.

Why Administrators Misassign Staff

Assignment of teachers outside their state-certified subjects and grade levels is a well-established management technique used in public schools nationwide (Robinson 1985). Misassigning teachers, or placing them "out-of-field," is the common response to a teacher shortage. Projections indicate that by 1988 teacher education program graduates will number 77,270, meeting only 80.5 percent of the expected need for additional teachers (Masland and Williams 1985). Other reasons for misassignment include overload (too many sections of a subject for one teacher but not enough to hire another teacher), underload (a specialized teacher without a full class load needs additional subjects), and a school district's desire to offer as many classes as possible (Robinson 1985).

In many states, misassignment of teachers is legal. Arizona, Alaska, Hawaii, New Hampshire, Nebraska, and Utah have no restrictions on the practice. Fifteen states allow certified teachers to teach subjects for which they are uncertified for part of the day. For example, Alabama permits teachers to spend 49 percent of their instruction time on subjects outside their certification area. Tennessee allows teachers to instruct one subject outside the certified area for a maximum of two periods a day (Council for Basic Education 1985).

Most states remain unaware of illegal misassignments even though they require schools to report all teacher assignments near the beginning of the academic year (Robinson 1985). States usually do not check these assignments against certification records. Reasons given by states for not verifying certification include the lack of computers and difficulties in maintaining up-to-date files that include summer study inservice credits. One exception is Rhode Island where assignments are checked immediately and schools are notified to correct any misassignments. Rhode Island school districts may be required to return all state aid money used toward the misassigned teachers' salaries until the teachers are given in-field assignments (Council for Basic Education 1985).

On-site checks of teacher assignments occur about every five years in most states. Penalties for misassignments, however, are minimal. Schools with misassigned teachers typically receive a lower accreditation rating if teacher loads are not adjusted within a year (Council for Basic Education 1985).

Extent of Misassignment

Since states rarely monitor misassignment practices, exact figures reflecting the problem's extent nationwide remain unavailable. Roth (1986) estimates, however, that about 12.4 percent of all newly hired teachers (approximately 26,300) are not certified in the fields to which they are assigned.

Studies conducted in some states for the 1983-84 school year show alarming figures. For example, Mississippi estimated that 1,319 high school teachers were assigned out-of-field for part of the day. Washington reported that 42 percent of 2,988 middle school classes surveyed were taught by teachers out-of-field. Utah, with no restrictions on out-of-field teaching, reported the percentage of misassigned teachers in various subjects ranged from 7.9 to 88.8 percent (Council for Basic Education 1985).

Where Misassignments Occur

Between 25 and 33 percent of all new math and science teachers nationwide are not certified in those fields (Rumberger 1985). The 1983-84 state studies showed that misassignments in Washington occurred frequently in math, science, language arts, and history. The most common out-of-field assignments in Mississippi were social sciences, followed by general science, math, and English. Utah misassignments occurred most often in science, followed by math, foreign languages, language arts, and social studies (Council for Basic Education 1985). A 1981 study in North Carolina revealed that 60.1 percent of the state's reading teachers were out-of-field, followed by math (37.3 percent), science (30.4 percent), health (23.8 percent), and English (22.5 percent) (Robinson 1985).

These figures show a trend for misassignments to occur at the school curriculum's core. Administrators seem to avoid misassigning teachers to subjects that require observable skills such as vocational education or art. The assumption appears to be that any teacher can instruct core courses with a good textbook and supplementary materials (Council for Basic Education 1985).

Results of Misassignments

Misassignments affect student learning. For example, declining test scores have been reported nationwide for high school students in math and science where teacher shortages are acute and many misassignments occur (Masland and Williams 1983). A study conducted by Hawk et al. (1985) found in-field math teachers knew more about the subject and used more effective teaching practices than out-of-field math teachers. As a result, in-field teachers' students achieved at a

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higher level than the other students. Effective reading teachers need considerable training (*The New York Times* 8 October 1985). Thus, misassigning teachers to elementary school reading classes can hamper the students' acquisition of the skill.

Teachers suffer from being misassigned. They cannot achieve professional status since administrators are not allowing them to use their specialized training (Robinson 1985). Masland and Williams (1983) question why states require a major or minor in mathematics for certification when the school district considers a social studies major sufficient for teaching math. Teachers placed out-of-field lose confidence in the value of their professional training and could decide to leave the profession (Masland and Williams 1983).

Misassignment Responsibility

Teacher education programs, school districts, and state education agencies share responsibility for misassignment (Masland and Williams 1983). Teacher education programs continue to offer curricula that prepare teachers for surplus areas while neglecting the development of programs to attract students in shortage areas. A lack of cooperative planning exists between school district officials and teacher educators to provide programs that meet long-range certification and retraining needs.

School districts misassign teachers to fill classrooms without communicating to the public that there is a staffing problem. They are not open to creating part-time and shared-time teaching positions or to reassigning personnel to the classroom (Watts 1986). They also avoid interschool or interdistrict cooperation and skillful recruiting (Robinson 1985).

State education agencies mandate complex certification requirements and then allow out-of-field teaching. Most states do not thoroughly investigate misassignment, nor do they end the practice when it is found in school districts (Robinson 1985).

Many states are increasing the number of courses required for high school graduation and decreasing class size in elementary schools (Robinson 1985). Such regulations create pressure for misassignment. But "ending out-of-field teaching would be the one most effective, and certainly the cheapest, way to improve the quality of education in the United States" (Council for Basic Education 1985).

— Joan Barrett

References

Many of the following references—those identified with an EJ or ED number—have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. The journal articles should be available at most research libraries. The documents (citations with an ED number) are available on microfiche in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 700 locations. Documents also can be ordered through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service. Call (800) 227-3742 for price and order information. For a list of ERIC collections in your area or for information on submitting documents to ERIC, contact the ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 293-2450.

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